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Conference: Living in Uncertainty – Kierkegaard and Possibility

The Evolution of Possibility in Kierkegaard's Authorship

Paper draft by Kresten Lundsgaard-Leth, Aalborg University

There is a confusing equivocality to the concept of »possibility« in Kierkegaard's authorship. The very *meaning* of the concept thus seems to undergo a curious transformation with every changing perspective of the many Kierkegaardian pseudonyms.

Most interpreters are off course well aware that the modal terms of (i) »actuality«, (ii) »possibility« and (iii) »necessity« play a crucial role to Kierkegaard, but it is rarely attempted to say something more *systematic* about *how* and *why* these concepts are used in such different ways throughout the authorship. To sketch at least the outlines of such an account is what I will try to do here.

I will allow myself to disregard almost Kierkegaard's entire non-pseudonymous authorship (with the sole exception of *Works of Love*) just as I will allow myself to focus exclusively on texts that were written between 1843 and 1849. I do this because I believe Kierkegaard to have developed a coherent and mature theory of existence within this six-year span.

Somewhat regrettably, I have not found the time and space to integrate neither *Either/Or*, *Repetition* or *Stages On Life's Way* into this brief account – but I will neither try to justify nor elaborate on this exclusion at present.

It is conspicuous how the Kierkegaardian pseudonyms appear to become increasingly interested in considering and applying the category of »possibility« throughout the publications of the 1840s.

In *Fear and Trembling*, thus, the concept of »possibility« is used a mere four times in total, whereas Johannes de Silentio refers to »impossibility« a combined eleven times. In *Philosophical Crumbs*, the two concepts are utilized a combined 26 times (with a palpable 17 of these, conspicuously, appearing in the infamous "Interlude").

In *The Concept of Anxiety* from 1844, »possibility« finally seems to have become a regular corner stone concept. In this book, the concepts of possibility and impossibility thus turn up on no less than 81 different occasions.

In *The Concluding Unscientific Postscript* from 1846, the tendency continue in so far as the concepts are employed a record 172 times in total.

Although we are "down" to 147 and 115 instances of application of the two terms, in *The Works of Love* from 1847 and *The Sickness Unto Death* from 1849, these works still represent an actual peak in the pseudonymous interest in the concepts of »possibility« and »impossibility«. This is the case for

the very simple reason that both of these works are simply much shorter books than the quantitatively very bulky *Postscript*.

All that being said: The purely *arithmetical* exercise of exhibiting *where* the concept of »possibility« is used *how often* is admittedly neither very *philosophically* interesting nor very *explanatorily* enlightening.

Allow me therefore to jump straight into *Fear and Trembling* and begin a more substantial investigation of the evolution of possibility in Kierkegaard's thought.

In *Fear and Trembling*, we ultimately do not learn much *positive* about the book's real message. Instead, we learn something *negative* about which kind of philosophical position will *not* allow us to make sense of the figure of the »venerable father Abraham«. As anyone vaguely familiar with the Old Testament will know, Abraham is willing to sacrifice his only child, his son Isaac, to »prove« his faith *in* – as well as his faithfulness *to* – God. Abraham never actually sacrifices Isaac, but he is seemingly fully *willing* to do so. And the true »greatness« – as well as the undeniable *appallingness* – of his faith consists precisely in his calm willingness to follow through.

The way I see it, *Fear and Trembling* primarily has a *negative* lesson to teach, namely the following: it is utterly *impossible* to make sense of Abraham's faith inside the scope of the »ethical« sphere. In the ethical sphere – which we can allow ourselves to identify more or less with Hegelian »ethical life« – we act due to *reasons* that can become *recognized* by other rational agents. To be able to become recognized by others, ethical deeds must abide by *norms* that are – also at least potentially – *understandable* to everyone else. There can of course be intelligible ethical *conflicts*, for instance the tragic dilemma between mourning dead loved ones in an appropriate manner and protecting the city-state that we encounter from Antigone. Indeed, there always will be a whole lot of such conflicts. Such conflicts are still, however, intelligible conflicts *internal* to the ethical sphere.

Regarding the problem of personal *identity*, these considerations also have a huge significance: According to the Hegelian model, thus, I cannot become *who* I am in splendid isolation. Rather, I must necessarily transform my *internal* emotions into *external* actions, since I can only understand myself as being in a certain way if others recognize that I am in fact acting in accordance with this way of being.

Here, we should ask ourselves whether Hegelianism is not *philosophically right* to suggest that it does not make any sense to speak about any constitution of subjectivity outside of the domain of normative processes of recognition that we call the »ethical sphere«? Furthermore, does this not imply that we can only make sense of *any* possible action, if we manage to make sense of ourselves to *others* who can then go on to recognize – or refuse to recognize – the reasons we present?

I believe we have strong reasons to take these Hegelian claims seriously, and Johannes de Silentio does indeed take them very seriously. As such, he insists that it is utterly »impossible« for anyone who does not have faith to understand how we could ever be able to justify Abraham. We do learn

that Abraham's faith *somehow* enables him to exist as this »particular individual« in an exclusive God-relation (which allegedly transcends all social relations) and we also learn that we must *somehow* be able to consider infanticide as a »holy deed«. But we never actually learn what is *really* implied in these proclamations – other than the fact that they are both utterly incomprehensible not to mention absurdly appalling to ethical reasoning. Which indeed they are.

More must be said, but I do claim that the primary lesson of *Fear and Trembling* is the following. *However* faith might be characterized in *positive* terms (we still do not know *how*), it is »impossible« to understand from the point of view of the standard philosophical framework of Hegelianism – which at Kierkegaard's time was and – and still very much is – the standard point of view of a lot of highly persuasive, social philosophy.

Allow me to move on: in the "Interlude" of the *Philosophical Crumbs*, we learn a bit more about why we could have some *actual* reasons to be skeptical towards Hegelian ontology. Interestingly, Johannes Climacus coins this critique in a terminology permeated by the modal distinctions between »actuality«, »possibility« and »necessity«.

The fundamental claim of Climacus is that it is ultimately completely ontologically unacceptable to conflate the *logical* concept of »necessity« with the *historical* concepts of »actuality« and »possibility«. Climacus poses the following, rhetorical question: »Has the possible, by having become actual, become more necessary than it was« – and clearly answers it with a resounding *no*.

To Climacus, necessity has nothing to do whatsoever with *historical* realities. In history, the transition from the past to the now is simply a *possible* transition from one state to another, in which *one* option (rather than other *possible* ones) becomes actualized. By having become actualized, however, it does not become necessary – after the fact – *that* it became actualized. It simply became the actual case that whatever happened actually became the case (i.e. *that* it happened) – and metaphysical necessity has nothing at all to do with any of it.

Importantly, the possibility-actuality dialectics of real, historical life becomes radicalized when it comes to the self-reflective choices and actions of human beings. Human beings, thus, are not only exposed to non-necessary instances of »becoming« in natural history (such as the transition from an acorn to an oak tree); they are also able to act *freely* (i.e. to choose to do one thing rather than another).

Since Hegel claims that the philosophical understanding of what has taken place is effectively a way of realizing the *necessity* of the historical processes, Climacus is certainly criticizing Hegelianism here. The actual Hegel, however, is *not* suggesting that historical and logical necessity amount to one and the same thing. He is also not arguing that history could not have turned out in any other way – merely because he, terminologically, refers to the dialectical patterns of historical development as »necessities« that philosophy can grasp *after* they have happened.

Is the disagreement between Hegel and Climacus then a mere *terminological* one? And if it is: have we yet learned anything positive about the Kierkegaardian project – other than the fact that it *cannot* be conflated with neither Hegelian ethical life nor with Hegelian metaphysics?

Not really, I think – so let us move on to *The Concept of Anxiety*. In *The Concept of Anxiety*, the concepts of »possibility« and »actuality« are applied in a manner that is quite distinct from the appalling faith-terminology from *Fear and Trembling* let alone the very formal ontology-terminology from the *Crumbs*.

More specifically, Vigilius Haufninensis “existentializes” the concepts by zeroing in on the way in which each *individual* human being is spiritually awoken from the »dreaming« state of childhood in an anxious realization of »freedom’s actuality as the possibility of possibility«.

In *The Concept of Anxiety*, thus, the concept of »possibility« is specifically meant to imply an *experiential* – rather than a merely logical – category. When we *experience* that we have possibilities (to act) in a way that other animals do not, thus, this experience, firstly, *feels* in a certain way (i.e. it begets »anxiety«). Secondly, it totally restructures how we must understand our lives. As such, we cannot experience the *possibility of freedom* without also experiencing that this very possibility makes it necessary for us to take *responsibility* for how we act with this freedom (once we start to act). To put the same point differently: the very experience of the spiritual fact *that* we are free forces us to make sense our lives through normative concepts of how we *ought* to act. And this realization is anxiety-inducing.

To be sure, *The Concept of Anxiety* also focuses a lot on the possibility and actuality of the theological concept of »sin«. Briefly put, sin is the qualitative transition that breaks with the ethically ignorant innocence of childhood. For these reason, the forms of anxiety connected with sinful existence are no longer »dreamily« concerned with the mere *possibility* of sinful action – but with possible approaches to being a sinner. The qualitative act of sinning itself, however, cannot be described by the »psychological« approach of Vigilius who therefore limits himself to talking about states of mind such as uncommunicative »inclosing reserve« or the lack of »earnestness« that both increase our propensity to sin.

The Concept of Anxiety is stuffed with remarkably acute psychological and existential insights – but: it nonetheless remains very unclear what actual sinning amounts to. It also remains rather unclear, what we are to understand by the claim in the final chapter of the book that anxiety can be »saving through faith.« Allegedly, this has to do with the fact that »he who is educated by possibility is educated according to his infinitude« which – for its part – »consumes all finite ends and discovers all their deceptiveness«, wherefore »possibility is the weightiest of all categories«.

But again: but what have we actually learned hereby *besides* the claim that the standards of finite, ethical life are ill equipped to “measure” the message that Vigilius is here to present? We already knew this to be the case – I might add – from *Fear and Trembling*.

We might do better having a look at *The Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, in which Johannes Climacus returns with a vengeance to tell us a “little” more about the problem he posed in the *Crumbs*: »*can there be a historical point of departure for an eternal consciousness?*«.

Climacus insists that he only seeks to dress up this problem in its »historical costume«, but it quickly becomes evident that this new approach requires him to shift from the highly speculative terminology of the “Interlude” to an approach much closer to the more existential lingo of *The Concept of Anxiety*.

In *The Postscript*, we are forcefully assured that »actuality« is both existentially and ethically »higher than possibility«. Here, »possibility« clearly no longer indicates the infinitely educating possibility of faith from *The Concept of Anxiety*. Instead, it designates the way-too-abstract possibilities of metaphysical thinking as well as the way-too-disengaged possibilities of aesthetical existence. Importantly, the truly »ethical« is no longer thought as the kind of agency which takes place inside the space of normative reasoning in Hegel’s ethical life. Instead, the true ethical stance is now modelled on the iconic figure of Socrates, whose »passionate inwardness« and insistence on personal »appropriation« – rather than the blind acceptance of – society’s norms Climacus praises in no uncertain terms.

The paradoxality of Socratic existence in all its ethical actuality, however, will only take us so far. The paradox between the infinite passion of Socrates for the »Good«, on the one hand, and the temporal conditions of human existence, on the other, thus does not represent the highest kind of ethical actuality that we encounter in the *Postscript*. This price goes to Christian religiousness, rather, in which the paradox becomes *internal* to the truth itself, in so far as this very truth (i.e. the incarnation of Christ) is a conceptually impossible fusion of eternity and finitude.

All things considered, *The Postscript* tells us much more about the (i) *general* existential predicament of humans, about (ii) the true, Socratic nature of ethical actuality and about (iii) the nature of Christian faith than we could ever learn from *Fear and Trembling* (let alone from the *Crumbs*). He also couples the ontological paradox-approach from the *Crumbs* and transforms it into a far more experiential approach much closer to Vigilius’ approach in *The Concept of Anxiety*.

But still, what are we to understand by the faith that we now know is utterly non-Hegelian, potentially »saving« through possibility, and doubly paradoxical in an existential – and not merely an ontological – sense of the term?

On my interpretation, Kierkegaard presents a two-sided answer to this question in the non-pseudonymous *Works of Love* from 1847 as well as in *The Sickness Unto Death* from 1849. I will begin my conclusion with the *Sickness Unto Death*.

In *The Sickness Unto Death*, we are given a somewhat more substantial account of Kierkegaard's theory of existence. And as we are getting used to by now, the modal terminology of »possibility«, »actuality« and »necessity« is once more employed in a crucial manner.

Anti-Climacus presents a series of investigations into the phenomenon of »despair«. Despair is a term meant to encompass the vast range of phenomenologically distinct ways in which we can misconduct our lives as *free* existing individuals. And just as in the Schelling-inspired psychology of *The Concept of Anxiety*, it is clear here that a »spiritually« healthy »self« is somehow dependent on being able to perform a delicate and – in so far as possible – harmonious balancing between the polar opposite »aspects« that constitute selfhood. The formula for non-despair, importantly (although we are virtually told that there is no self to be found who is entirely un-despairing), is for the self to be »grounded transparently in the power that established it«.

Anti-Climacus specifies that the self is – among other things – a »synthesis« between freedom and necessity, and it becomes obvious that this – once again – hinges on a *modal* analysis when he goes on to address both »necessity's« and »possibility's despair« as two vital forms »of this decease«.

In his description of »possibility's despair«, Anti-Climacus clarifies that the possibility-despairing self – as he puts it – »exhausts itself floundering about in possibility, yet it never moves from where it is nor gets anywhere, for necessity is just that 'where' [...] Becoming is a movement *from* some place, but becoming oneself is a movement *at* that place.« This is crucial – but how, precisely?

Well, we know that the self has been established by a »power« different from itself – and also, that non-despairing somehow amounts to being grounded transparently in this power. This power, however, which clearly represents the necessary »'where'« that *ought* to restrict the extent to which the self allows itself to get lost in the pure possibilities of abstract thinking as well as in the unrestricted possibilities of romantic fantasizing, *cannot* be a (self)limitation that stems from the Hegelian norms of recognition in the »ethical sphere«.

To allow one's self to be constituted by the opinion of others (i.e. by the intelligible norms of social recognition) is thus precisely *the* predominant version of »necessity's despair«. What must instead be the case for Anti-Climacus position to make sense, is for the self to have been somehow constituted in a way it cannot simply »choose« not to be (but that it can off course always *relate* to). This vital feature of selfhood can neither come down to an essential genetic nature (that would be flat-out »fatalism«, which Anti-Climacus explicitly refutes); nor can it be the outcome of social processes of recognition.

We do have a nature, off course – just as we are largely shaped by the socio-cultural processes in which we find ourselves. We can also make actual choices that make a difference, both personally

and politically. We are not, however, necessitated products of social processes (as Hegel would have it) – just as we cannot create ourselves *ex nihilo* in order to become who we would like ourselves to be by choosing the most attractive *possible* self that we can fantasize about (as Sartre would later have it).

Instead, we always already have an individual self, established by some other power *than itself*. This self can participate in the social game of giving and taking intelligible reasons. Indeed, it must do so. But: it also can also have *personal* reasons to do something other than the ones that would be socially recognizable – simply because *he* or *she* happens to be who he or she happens to be. And, importantly, for *no other reason*.

This might be inexplicable from the point of view of social reasoning – but that is the whole point of having *personal* reasons that are irreducible to the outcomes of social processes of recognition. Crucially, this also explains how a human being can in fact be completely recognized by other persons and still suffer from despair. Bourgeois society, as Anti-Climacus does not tire from accentuating, does not only provide the necessary, intersubjective framework in which we can become who we are. Tragically, it can also *distract* us – as singular individuals – from becoming who we are.

Accepting the person we happen to be is oftentimes hard: maybe we are less perfect than we would like to be, aesthetically as well ethically, maybe we are not loved in return by the ones we love, or maybe we have suddenly stopped loving the mothers and fathers of our children that we would very much prefer to continue loving. We simply cannot entirely control our own selves.

We can, nonetheless, always find hope in the faith that »for God, everything is possible«, although any such hope must always begin with grounding oneself transparently in the actual self that one has been given.

We are now able to re-interpret the previous, pseudonymous texts in the following way: (i) faith is not about validating infanticide – but about addressing a kind of normativity which transcends »ethical life«. Faith (ii) is not about out-competing an ontology of necessity with an alternative ontology of actuality and possibility – but about *existential* actuality that transcends *any* kind of philosophical system-building. Faith (iii) is *also* not about having faith in any undetermined possibility whatsoever – but about having faith in hopeful possibilities for one's own, given self. And (iv) faith is not about placing epistemological trust in the paradoxical nature of an *external* event that happened two millennia ago – but about having a self which is in *itself* paradoxically structured to the extent that it has reasons to act that it cannot argue for inside the space of social reasons of ethical sphere.

But what about *everyone else's* self? Should we not care about *other* existing human beings – and their struggles to be and become themselves? This question is addressed by Kierkegaard himself in the *Works of Love* from 1847.

Works of Love is a series of deliberations about neighbourly love. The »concept of neighbour« – to put it with Kierkegaard – »really means a *duplicating of one's own self*. Neighbour is what philosophers would call the *other* [...] As far as thought is concerned the *neighbour* or *other* need not even exist [...] To be sure, *neighbour* is in itself manifold, for *neighbour* means *all men*; and yet in another sense one person is enough.«

To love the neighbour evidently makes something visible *in* the other that neither abstract thinking nor social reasonableness enables us to *see*. But what does a *loving* relation *to* the other imply? First and foremost, loving deeds are about helping the other »to love God«. To love God, importantly, »is [also in fact] to love oneself in truth«, in so far as – which we already know from *The Sickness Unto Death* – »God« is in fact the power that has established each self. A power, furthermore, in which a non-despairing must be transparently grounded.

Loving deeds, as we now realize, are ultimately a helpful attempt to assist this attempted grounding.

Kierkegaard also states in the *Works of Love* that love »is the opposite of despairingly hoping nothing at all«. Love's hopefulness, in modal as well as normative terms, hopes for the »*possibility* of the good« for *oneself as well as for others*, which – for its part – is nothing but »the lover's [very] relationship to other men [...] hoping for them, he infinitely keeps possibility open with infinite partiality for the possibility of the good«. In Kierkegaard's own words.

Something very important is revealed here: it is not enough to hope for the possibility of *everything* in the totally unqualified sense that »for God, everything is possible«. Literally speaking, this is not *good* enough. In other words: It is not normative enough with regards to the self of *another self*. More to the point, thus, we must hope for the *possibility for the good*. Not only for ourselves – but also for others. The other, importantly, is also a self who has not established herself – but who is nonetheless also *not* a mere product of processes of social recognition.

A loving relationship to the actual *otherness* of the other's self, therefore, must be such that the other is emancipated in a twofold fashion: *both* from the bourgeois worry about who the rest of society (including myself) prefers her to be *and* from the romantic – and existentialist – fantasy that it is merely up to her who she is.

Weirdly, love hereby also turns out to be an inter-personal relation that is specifically designed to *free* the loved one *from* the norms of intersubjective relations and instead allow the neighbour to be neither »this or that« but to be herself [in front of God] – and this everyone can be if she wills it. Hopefully.